

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Jason Davis Pitts, # 287624,) **C/A No. 7:12-1499-TMC-JDA**
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Plaintiff,)
)
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vs.)
)
Sheriff Chuck Wright, *Sptg. Co. Sheriff Off.*;)
Leon Lawhon;)
Terry Richards, *Lyman City Police Dept.*;)
Terry Richards, *Duncan City Police Dept.*,)
)
)
Defendants.)

Background of this Case

Plaintiff is an inmate at the Kirkland Correctional Institution of the South Carolina Department of Corrections. The “lead” Defendant is the Sheriff of Spartanburg County. The other Defendants are two local law enforcement officers in Spartanburg County and a private citizen.

Plaintiff signed the Complaint on May 30, 2012. The South Carolina Department of Corrections website (<https://sword.doc.state.sc.us/scdc-public/>, last visited on June 6, 2012) indicates that Plaintiff entered the South Carolina Department of Corrections on June 4, 2012, and is scheduled for release on July 27, 2012. The Public Index for the Office of the Spartanburg County Clerk of Court (<http://192.146.148.40/publicindex/PICaseDetails.aspx?County=42+&Casenum=N156545&CourtType=G&CaseType=Criminal&CourtAgency=42001&LastName=Pitts&FirstNa>

me=Jason, last visited on June 6, 2012), indicates that, in Indictment No. 2012-GS-42-02732, Plaintiff on May 31, 2012, pled guilty to grand larceny (value more than \$2,000 but less than \$10,000) and was sentenced to five years in prison suspended to six months with probation for five years.¹

The “STATEMENT OF CLAIM” portion of the Section 1983 Complaint reveals that this civil rights action concerns Plaintiff’s truck. Plaintiff alleges that Defendant Lawhon failed to return his (Plaintiff’s truck) and is possibly seeking “to unlawfully file for a lost title with the DMV.” Plaintiff alleges that Sheriff Wright and the two law enforcement officers have failed to pursue a criminal investigation of Defendant Lawhon. Plaintiff seeks a jury trial and \$80,000 in damages.

Discussion

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* Complaint pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915, 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, and the Prison Litigation Reform Act. The review² has been conducted

¹A federal court may take judicial notice of factual information located in postings on governmental websites in the United States. *Mitchell v. Newsom*, Civil Action No. 3:11-0869-CMC-PJG, 2011 WL 2162723, at *3 n. 1 (D.S.C. May 10, 2011) (collecting cases), adopted, 2011 WL 2162184 (D.S.C. June 1, 2011); see also *In Re Katrina Canal Breaches Consolidated Litigation*, 533 F. Supp. 2d 615, 631–33 & nn. 14–15 (E.D. La. 2008) (collecting cases indicating that federal courts may take judicial notice of governmental websites, including court records); and *Williams v. Long*, 585 F. Supp. 2d 679, 686–88 & n. 4 (D. Md. 2008) (collecting cases indicating that postings on government websites are inherently authentic or self-authenticating).

²Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and Local Civil Rule 73.02 DSC, the undersigned is authorized to review such complaints for relief and submit findings and recommendations to the District Court.

in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 31–35 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324–25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 519 (1972)(*per curiam*); *Nasim v. Warden, Maryland House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951, 953–56 (4th Cir. 1995)(*en banc*); *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70, 71–74 (4th Cir. 1983); *Loe v. Armistead*, 582 F.2d 1291, 1295–96 (4th Cir. 1978); and *Gordon v. Leeke*, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978). Plaintiff is a *pro se* litigant, and thus his pleadings are accorded liberal construction. See *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 90–95 (2007)(*per curiam*); *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 5, 9–10 (1980)(*per curiam*); and *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319, 321–23 (1972)(*per curiam*). When a federal court is evaluating a *pro se* complaint or petition, a plaintiff's or petitioner's allegations are assumed to be true. *Merriweather v. Reynolds*, 586 F. Supp. 2d 548, 554 (D.S.C. 2008). Nonetheless, a litigant must plead factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant or respondent is plausibly liable, not merely possibly liable. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 129 S.Ct. 1937, 1951–52 (2009). Even when considered under this less stringent standard, the Complaint is subject to summary dismissal. The requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep't of Social Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387, 390–91 (4th Cir. 1990).

Sheriff Wright is immune from suit. Sheriff's Departments in South Carolina are state agencies, not municipal departments. See S.C. Code Ann. § 23-13-550 (2008); 1975 S.C.Att'y.Gen'l.Op. No. 47 (Jan. 22, 1975); and S.C. Code Ann. § 23-13-10 (Westlaw 2012), which provides that only the Sheriff has the authority to hire or terminate employees of the Sheriff's Department, and that the Sheriff is responsible for neglect of duty or

misconduct by a deputy sheriff. See also *Edwards v. Lexington Cnty. Sheriff's Dep't*, 386 S.C. 285, 287 n. 1, 688 S.E.2d 125, 127 n.1 (2010) ("However, under South Carolina law, the sheriff and sheriff's deputies are State, not county, employees."); *Allen v. Fid. and Deposit Co.*, 515 F. Supp. 1185, 1189–91 (D.S.C. 1981) (County cannot be held liable for actions of deputy sheriff because deputy sheriffs serve at pleasure of the Sheriff, not the County), *aff'd*, 694 F.2d 716 (4th Cir. 1982) [Table]; and *Comer v. Brown*, 88 F.3d 1315, 1332 (4th Cir. 1996) (suit against Sheriff of Greenville County: ". . . Sheriff Brown is an arm of the State."). Indeed, any damages to the plaintiff, if awarded in this case, would be paid by the South Carolina State Insurance Reserve Fund. *Comer v. Brown*, 88 F.3d at 1332 ("Judgments against the Greenville County Sheriff are paid by the South Carolina State Insurance Reserve Fund.").

Plaintiff does not have standing to seek a criminal investigation relating to Defendant Lawhon and his alleged failure to deliver Plaintiff's truck to the home of Plaintiff's mother. See *Linda R. S. v. Richard D.*, 410 U.S. 614, 619 (1973) (a private citizen does not have a judicially cognizable interest in the prosecution or non-prosecution of another person); *Diamond v. Charles*, 476 U.S. 54, 64–65 (1986) (*applying Linda R. S. v. Richard D.* and collecting cases); *Leeke v. Timmerman*, 454 U.S. 83, 86–87 (1981), which arose in South Carolina; and *Lopez v. Robinson*, 914 F.2d 486, 494 (4th Cir. 1990). In *Leeke v. Timmerman*, inmates who were allegedly beaten by prison guards sought criminal arrest warrants against the guards. The inmates presented sworn statements to a state magistrate, but the state magistrate, upon a Solicitor's request, declined to issue the warrants. In *Leeke v. Timmerman*, the Supreme Court of the United States reiterated its earlier holding in *Linda R.S. v. Richard D.*, and again ruled that a private citizen lacks a

judicially cognizable interest in the criminal prosecution of other persons. *Leeke v. Timmerman*, 454 U.S. at 86–87. Moreover, in its opinion in *Leeke v. Timmerman*, the Supreme Court of the United States cited a similar precedent from the Supreme Court of South Carolina. See *Leeke v. Timmerman*, 454 U.S. at 87 n. 2, *citing State v. Addison*, 2 S.C. 356, 364 (1871).

Defendant Lawhon is subject to summary dismissal for lack of action under color of state law. See *Am. Mfr. Mut. Ins. Co. v. Sullivan*, 526 U.S. 40, 50–52 (1999); *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980); and *Hall v. Quillen*, 631 F.2d 1154, 1155–56 & nn. 2–3 (4th Cir. 1980). The district court in *Hall v. Quillen* had disposed of the case against a physician and a court-appointed attorney on grounds of immunity. In affirming the district court's order, the Court of Appeals, however, indicated that lower courts should first determine whether state action occurred:

But immunity as a defense only becomes a relevant issue in a case such as this if the court has already determined affirmatively that the action of the defendant represented state action. This is so because state action is an essential preliminary condition to § 1983 jurisdiction, and a failure to find state action disposes of such an action adversely to the plaintiff.

Hall v. Quillen, 631 F.2d at 1155 (citations omitted).

Although a private individual or corporation can act under color of state law, his, her, or its actions must occur where the private individual or corporation is a willful participant in joint action with the State or with an agent of the State. *Dennis v. Sparks*, 449 U.S. 24, 27–28 (1980). Purely private conduct, no matter how wrongful, injurious, fraudulent, or discriminatory, is not actionable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 or under the Fourteenth

Amendment. See *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 936 (1982); and *Burton v. Wilmington Parking Auth.*, 365 U.S. 715, 721 (1961).³

Whether a private individual's action or corporation's action rises to the level of state action necessarily depends on the relationship between the activity and the state. The inquiry involves "whether there is a sufficiently close nexus between the State and the challenged action . . . so that the action of the latter may be fairly treated as that of the State itself." *Jackson v. Metro. Edison Co.*, 419 U.S. 345, 351 (1974). In *Blum v. Yaretsky*, 457 U.S. 991, 1004 (1982), the Supreme Court held that a state is responsible for private action only when it has exercised "coercive power" or has provided "significant encouragement" in the implementation of the action. It is also well settled that "a private person does not act under color of state law simply because he invokes state authority." *Brummett v. Camble*, 946 F.2d 1178, 1184 (5th Cir. 1991), which is cited in *Anderson v. Posey*, Civil Action No. 2:10-3180-TLW-RSC, 2010 WL 6562897, at *3 (D.S.C. Dec. 23, 2010), adopted, 2011 WL 1595265 (D.S.C. April 27, 2011).

When Plaintiff was arrested on March 27, 2012, his truck was across the street from the location of Plaintiff's arrest. Plaintiff's mother obtained Plaintiff's keys to the truck during a visit to the Spartanburg County Detention Facility. Plaintiff's mother then delivered the truck keys to Defendant Lawhon for the purpose of bringing the truck to her house for safekeeping. Defendant Lawhon, apparently, took Plaintiff's truck to a location under his

³*Burton* involved the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, not 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Federal courts have uniformly held that conduct which constitutes state action under the Fourteenth Amendment also constitutes action under color of state law, insofar as suits under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 are concerned. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48–49 (1988) (collecting cases).

control or ownership. According to Plaintiff, Defendant Lawhon has kept the truck since that time. Under the facts of this case, there was no state involvement in Defendant's Lawhon's failure to take Plaintiff's truck to Plaintiff's mother's home. *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. at 936 ("Careful adherence to the 'state action' requirement . . . also avoids imposing on the State, its agencies or officials, responsibility for conduct for which they cannot fairly be blamed.").

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the District Court dismiss the above-captioned case *without prejudice* and without service of process. Plaintiff's attention is directed to the Notice on the next page.

June 6, 2012
Greenville, South Carolina

s/Jacquelyn D. Austin
Jacquelyn D. Austin
United States Magistrate Judge

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

Plaintiff is advised that he may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Judge. **Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections.** “[I]n the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must ‘only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.’” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 72 advisory committee’s note).

Specific written objections must be filed within fourteen (14) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b); see Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), (d). Filing by mail pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

**Larry W. Propes, Clerk of Court
United States District Court
300 East Washington Street — Room 239
Greenville, South Carolina 29601**

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).